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## **The moral economy of the UK student protest movement 2010-2011**

### **Abstract**

*The winter of 2010 through to the spring of 2011 saw a number of high profile, nationally and locally organized student protests and occupations of university campuses all around the UK. These were a direct response to the government policy to lift the cap on higher education tuition fees and the reduction in government funding for higher education institutions in England. National protests took place on November, 10<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup> and December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010 and 29<sup>th</sup> January and 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2011. The protests on November 10<sup>th</sup> were condemned by student union leaders and politicians alike after hundreds of students stormed Conservative Party Headquarters at Milbank, London, smashed windows, inflicted damage to property, and occupied the rooftop.*

*In light of this wave of student protests and to build on recent research conducted by the author on student protest networks (author, 2011; author & author 2012), I draw on and reorient the work of E.P. Thompson (1971; 1993) to argue that are we witnessing a 'moral economy' of student protests. This paper draws on a two and a half-year ethnographic study comprising of semi-structured interviews with student political activists, observations of local and national demonstrations and analysis of on-line blogs produced by the student political community during the occupations. I argue that the student protests and occupations are the latest example of a rejection of the marketization and commodification of the university. I find that the student community have*

*mobilized in defense of an embedded tradition- affordable higher education- and that they are politically motivated by what they consider to be an entitlement violation.*

## **Introduction**

*The old customs which still linger on in the obscure nooks and corners of our native land, or which have survived the march of progress in our busy city's life (Ditchfield, 1896, as cited by Thompson, 1993, p. 2)*

*Some of us used to joke that if corporations could bottle and sell the air that we breathe they would do it. Well, now nobody is laughing anymore (Hubbard & Miller 2005, p. 1)*

Free education has now become an old custom from a bygone era; for a time it did survive the march of the free market, but not anymore. The neoliberal victory over the higher education system in the UK (arguably because of the research excellence framework, the emphasis on grant capture and now tuition fees) is almost complete. These are all examples of how the UK university sector is becoming increasingly commodified and marketized. It was the increase in UK tuition fees and cuts to the higher education budget that provoked the student revolt 2010 - 2011. During this period, the UK saw a number of high profile student protests on 10<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> , and 30<sup>th</sup> November; 9<sup>th</sup> December; 29<sup>th</sup> January and 26<sup>th</sup> March, and occupations at 40 universities. These protests and occupations were in direct response to the Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance undertaken by Lord Browne (also known as the Browne review).

The review started in November 2009 and ended in October 2010. The main aim of the review was to consider the balance of contributions between students, the taxpayers, employers and graduates to university funding in England. The review put forward three main recommendations. First, the government should remove the cap on higher education fees (then £3200 per annum) to enable universities to set their own fees. Second, loans should be provided by the government to pay for students' fees and living costs. The loans would not have to be repaid until student's pre tax earning were above £21,000. Any remaining monies owed would be written off after 30 years. Third, part-time students- who had to pay fees upfront-should be treated equal to full time students in terms of access to loans for their fees (Browne, 2010).

In May 2010 the newly elected Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government decided to accept the core of Browne's recommendations. On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010, the following government proposals (based on the Browne review) were put forward by David Willets, the Minister of State for Universities and Science: both part-time and full-time students would be entitled to loans. These are to be repaid at a rate of 9% on earnings over £21,000, per annum, any remaining debt to be written off after 30 years. One of the main differences between the Browne's recommendations and the government proposals was the ability of the university to set its own fees. The government decided instead to raise the cap to £9000 per annum. In addition, government policy stipulated that universities wishing to charge over £6000 per annum must demonstrate a commitment to widening participation. On December, 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the government bill was passed by the House of Commons by 323 votes to 302. In 2012, 94 out of 122 universities have announced that they will charge students

the full £9000 across all courses (Morgan, 2012). It was in anticipation of Parliament voting in favour of these proposals that students took to national and local protests in London and around the UK, including occupying a number of university buildings.

In this paper, I argue that these protests and occupations throughout the UK are a moral economy, in E.P. Thompson's sense of the term. A tradition of entitlement -affordable higher education- has been violated (in this case higher education tuition fees are set too high) and as such students have taken to direct action to contest the UK Parliament's decision to raise the cap on tuition fees and implement cuts to higher education. Thompson's work is under utilized in social movement studies, and sociology in general. I argue it has much to offer when it comes to explaining the political motivations and political actions of a community when they decide to mobilize. Thompson's approach enables us to consider how the protests and occupations by the students concerned are a political negotiation between cultural expectations of a community and economic pricing. And how if a community entitlement is violated this can lead to political action. To this end, this paper offers a new application of Thompson's moral economy to explain the student revolts 2010-11.

### **The moral economy approach**

In an earlier article (author, 2011) I provided a rapid response and preliminary analysis to these waves of protests and occupations by claiming that they were

politically motivated by a sense of injustice felt by the students since the new fee structure represents a new toll on higher education and a very real barrier for some trying to access it (author, 2011). My initial response drew tentatively on E.P Thompson's notion of moral economy (1971; 1993), in particular, on how the fees were an assault on traditional entitlements and moral sensibilities. In this paper, I expand and develop the theoretical application of Thompson's moral economy to the said protests and occupations.

The theoretical application used in this paper is drawn mainly from two of Thompson's writings: *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd* (1971) and *Customs in Common* (1993). His arguments centre on the emergence and political motivations of crowds in the 18<sup>th</sup> century who rioted against the increases of the price of food. The increases are a result of free market forces, but the riots should not be read merely as an instrumental reaction to the affordability of food or hunger, although these are important, it is the crowds moral outrage and political motivations that provide the explanation for their mobilizations against certain parties in that community such as millers, bakers etc.. The moral economy refers to the difference in what ought to be, that is the expectations of a community and the reality of the price rise. This gap is where the tensions emerge because it is seen as unfair, unjust and an attack on the communities' moral sentiments.

There are certain key ideas within the moral economy framework that provide an explanation as to why free market reforms result in collective action (by collective action in this context I mean riots, protests, and political

mobilizations). The central idea is that of legitimation. This refers to whether the rise in the price of food is perceived as legitimate by the community. The community refers to the relevant stakeholders. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were the villagers, marketers, bakers, millers and justices of the peace. If the price rise is perceived to be illegitimate within a community then this might result in political and collective action being taken. A collective, sanctioned by the community, generally draws upon a stock repertoire of political methods to defend against a price rise. The defense could include rioting, or threat of riot, if a good ( in the case of the 18<sup>th</sup> century this was food) is not returned to what is considered to be a reasonable price. The riot, in this respect, is therefore considered to be reasonable form of political action sanctioned by the community taken in defense of an entitlement. Therefore, political action in this context arises because entitlement to food, through rising prices has become unaffordable and is considered to be an entitlement violation. Each party within that community has a role and function based on traditional norms and values that are understood by the members of that community. As such, if a violation occurs even the authorities and elites within the community understand that certain members have a right to defend a tradition against a threat imposed by market forces.

Although used to analyze riots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is evident that Thompson's ideas have currency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, Patel (2009) and Patel and McMichael (2010) have used the moral economy framework for understanding the wave of food riots that took place around the world including those in Italy and Haiti in 2007. However, I would argue that the framework has

explanatory power beyond analyzing food riots. It offers a powerful framework for understanding the underlying moral antagonism towards free market reforms in terms of how communities express their collective and political grievances when faced with a threat from the imposition of free market policies more generally. In fact, Thompson (1993, p. 340) himself has stated that the Great British miners strike of 1984-5 was a moral economy since it was political resistance against “free market” reforms including pit closures, which threatened to take away the miners’ entitlement to a livelihood, a tradition that they had had for generations. Another more recent application comes from Bagguley (1996) who has used the moral economy argument to explain the very popular and UK wide anti-poll tax campaign of the 1990s, which brought about a change in UK government policy. Following in this tradition of appropriation and adaption, I argue that the concept of moral economy can be applied to explain why students campaigned against the increase in the fees and the cuts to the UK HE budget implemented by the UK coalition government.

Although tuition fees for higher education in parts of the UK have been in operation since 1997, payment for tuition has always been a source of contention for students. This is to be expected because students know that their parents did not have to pay for their higher education, they also know that students who enrolled before the rise in fees pay around one third of what they pay for the same education. The parents of today’s students pass on folk memories and stories of free education and, in some cases, entitlements to maintenance grants. It is arguable that higher education in the UK before 1997 was a traditional entitlement for students. So even though free at the point of



use higher education has not been an entitlement for sometime, it is reasonable to assume that they are aware of the erosion of such an entitlement. It is the case that most students have come to expect that fees need to be charged, however, the threefold increase has resulted in political action by the student community since the fee is now considered to be too high.

Applying Thompson's framework to today's situation, the coalition government's decision to increase higher education tuition fees and introduce budget cuts are examples of reforms that are a move towards further marketization of the UK university sector. This could be seen as an assault on an embedded custom- affordable higher education- and an 'entitlement violation' (Sen, 1981). The Browne review and the coalition government's policy of lifting the cap on tuition fees and the implementation of £2.9 billion cuts in the higher education budget are the reality which is out of line with what is classified as fair and reasonable amongst the student community. This gap in expectation and reality has opened up as a result of the further commodification of the university sector and the implementation of free market forces- this has led to moral outrage by the student community and this is why they have taken to protest and occupations.

### *Why the moral economy?*

Thompson's notion of moral economy is relatively under utilized in sociology, much less in social movement studies. This, therefore, begs the question, why use the moral economy argument in this case? The main reason is that the established social movement theories are deficient when it comes to explaining

collective action that is driven by moral concerns. Two schools of thought, resource mobilization theory (RMT) (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) and the political process approach (PPA) (Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam, 2001) do not really consider political motivations beyond resources, economic incentives, and structural opportunities. These theories are, however, very useful when it comes to identifying under what conditions protests and mobilizations can occur and what the incentives for political action might be, but in this case- affordable higher education- neither theory can explain *why* political action was undertaken by the students. This is largely because RMT is rooted in rational actor theory (RAT), which makes recourse to methodological individualism. Whilst RAT dispels myths about protest being irrational, it tends towards the other extreme of being too rational. The theory suggests that political activists only engage in action when there is an individual benefit to be had. This proposition is difficult to apply to the thousands of students who protested on the days mentioned, since many were already enrolled on courses that would not be affected by the increase. Although it is sometimes argued that selective incentives are possible for politicians, particularly those already in a position to further their political career (perhaps within formal student politics at the branch or national level of the students union, and I'm not convinced of this argument), many of the student activists on demonstrations do not seek incentives. Rather, they expressed outrage at an injustice and argued from a moral standpoint, displaying outrage that an entitlement had been violated. Furthermore, the student protests were based on a collective political goal based on normative arguments against the increase in fees, they were not individualistic. The PPA school of thought developed out of RMT and whilst it has been adapted it also

falls foul of the resource-based argument outlined above. However, one of the main ideas in PPA is that political organizations seek to influence government policy through the political opportunity structure. To some extent, this can be used to explain why students have little success in influencing government policy- especially in this case- since they are not close to the polity and as such they have little political leverage. However, it does not explain their values, ideas and normative political motivations, which led to the mobilizations. The moral economy approach in this case does.

### **The study**

The research carried out for this paper was part of larger project funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which investigated the politicizing effect of the university campus on students (Crossley, 2008). The research was primarily carried out at the University of Manchester, UK. This project lasted 2 years in total from January 2009- December 2010. The project took an ethnographic approach, which included conducting 53 semi-structured interviews with student politicians, observations of demonstrations, meetings of student political societies and groups (on and off campus), and analysis of 100 documents produced by political groups and societies based at the University of Manchester. During the project an 'upswing' of a 'cycle of contention' by student protestors occurred in light of the Browne review and the anticipated increase in tuition fees (Traugot, 1995; Tilly, 1995; Tarrow, 2011). Therefore, after the official ending of the project, for the next 12 months I continued to collect data derived from university blogs (especially those involved in protest occupations), the national press, and documents produced by the student community. In addition, I revisited earlier

interview data and analyzed further themes that were central to student politics. In particular, their feelings towards the commodification and marketization of higher education and the new fee structure which was to be implemented. The next section of the paper details the methodology used.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this ethnography was to understand the campus political world, as such I attempted to capture the everyday political life including the culture and social practices of the students under study in their natural settings (Brewer, 2000). To achieve this, the University of Manchester became a case study. A case study was appropriate in this context, since it was not possible to conduct meaningful research at more than on politically active university campus because of time and funding constraints of the project. The justification for the use of case studies in these circumstances are widely written about, both at a general methodological level and in the field social movement studies more specifically (Yin, 2009; Staggenborg and Klandermans, 2002). In short, a single case can be used as an 'analytical generalization' (Yin, 2009). However, to offset any potential local bias, I used student blogs which were reporting on the occupations and protests from different parts of the country. The statements made by the occupiers clearly stated their moral outrage against fees, which was consistent with the local, University of Manchester, student view.

The main methodology employed within this ethnography were 53 semi-structured interviews with student political activists. Students were asked a series of open-ended questions on their political and moral values, activist

biography including their political activities and experiences with social movements and campaigns (McAdam, 1989), their social and political networks, and how and why certain methods of recruitment were used to gain support for particular campaigns. Two sampling techniques were used to identify potential respondents. Firstly, purposive, this refers to choosing respondents 'who are nested in particular contexts' (Gray, 2004, p. 324). In this case, I contacted politicians via university student websites, posters and leaflets who were involved in the students union and those who were chairs of the political societies on campus. These respondents were excellent knowledge sources who were involved in the everyday life of political activities, organizing and taking part in campaigns and meetings as well as the day-to day minutiae of campus political life. Having made these contacts I then employed a second sampling technique, that of snowball sampling by asking the chairs of political societies and the students' union branch officers to put me in touch with other politicians that they knew on campus. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed and analyzed. Although there are biases with these types of sampling, there is little choice when one wants to understand a campus political world. There are no ready-made sampling frames of activists that one can randomly select from. Furthermore, purposely choosing *politically active* students for this study ensures that every respondent is suitable for interview according to the aims of the project.

Alongside arranging and carrying out interviews, I immersed myself, in so far as is practical, in the everyday life of student politics. I would regularly go to the students union building to see what events were occurring that day or week,

and regularly meet with student union branch officers and chairs and members of political societies to find out what, if anything, was happening on or off campus that was politically motivated. Some meetings were simply routine and party political matters, which helped with the aims of the wider project on how and why students become politically active. However, discussions at certain meetings did reveal a moral critique of neoliberalism. I kept field notes during certain events, for example, I observed several occupations and demonstrations that were connected with a wider anti-neoliberal critique of not just the university but with society more generally. These included the occupation of the roof top of the student university union branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland by the group People and Planet, who were arguing that the student population should evict them from the union premises because of perceived unethical investments (February, 2009); the student contingent who went along to the G20 Protests in London (March 2009), the Roscoe building occupation as a response to the increase in tuition fees and higher education budget cuts (October 2010- March 2011); and the demonstrations by the University of Manchester branches of UCU and the NUS as part of the larger national demonstration around the country on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2011, because of the expected increase in higher education tuition fees in light of the Browne review.

The documents collected included posters, flyers, the student union newspaper, the national press and online blogs of universities involved in occupations. The paper documents were mainly used to supplement the other main methods mentioned and to keep me in touch with current political issues

on campus. They were a vital resource in informing me when and where meetings or events were to be held. The online blogs, taken together (of which I drew upon 10), provided up-to-date knowledge of the occupations at a national level taking place around the country. Within these blogs there was a definite sense of political solidarity. Students writing on these blogs were voicing their support for the wider student political community.

### **Protests and occupations: a national overview**

The National Union of Students (NUS) organized national protests against the proposals of the Browne review between November 2010- March 2011. The first was on November 10<sup>th</sup> and was jointly organized with the University College Union (UCU, the lecturers union) an estimated 50,000 students turned out to express their opposition. It was the most controversial protest because 200 students broke away from the main demonstration and stormed Conservative Party headquarters at 30 Milbank, London. The demonstrators smashed windows and property and occupied the rooftop. It was estimated that another 1000 students supported this occupation from outside the building. These actions received criticisms from both the president of the NUS (Aaron Porter) and the UCU (Sally Hunt). This infuriated many students and subsequently caused a division between some of the more radical elements of the student protestors and the leadership of NUS (Solomon, 2011, p.15). In addition to the said unions the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) became involved in organizing protests on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> November, which included staged walkouts of schools and colleges across the country. On 9<sup>th</sup> December,

the day parliament voted on the proposals, 'an estimated 40,000 students protested in London' (Guardian, 2010).

As well as local and national marches, around 40 university occupations with a very wide geographical spread took place. In the south of England occupations were held at the Universities of Plymouth, Bristol, West of England, Kent, East London, London School of Economics, London Metropolitan University, Goldsmiths, and Cambridge. In the midlands and North: Universities of Nottingham, Bradford, Leeds, Manchester, and Newcastle. For the purposes of this paper it is interesting to note that major Scottish universities and Scottish students, who are not affected by the increase in fees and cuts in the same way as English Universities, also held occupations in solidarity with their English counterparts at the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Strathclyde and St Andrews. (Hensby, 2012).

### **Marketization and commodification as a precursor to the revolts**

Revolts as part of the moral economy do not emerge overnight, marketization and commodification of a good or service are usually a precursor to such political action. A revolt is likely to emerge when a price increase is perceived to be a financial barrier to what was once free or considered affordable, and or, the conditions of a good or service are considered inferior to expectations based on a normative understanding of what is value for money. Market reforms



of the higher education system have been impacting on the student experience for sometime, arguably, since 1997 when fees were first introduced.

Protests associated with the moral economy are not a matter of a simple price rise of a good, but a systematic implementation of market forces which causes social and political dissatisfaction. It is arguable that the marketization and commodification of the university sector has been at the root of student dissatisfaction for sometime. I argue this point because the government proposals announced on November 6<sup>th</sup> resulted in a series of protests very quickly (10<sup>th</sup> , 24<sup>th</sup> , 30<sup>th</sup> and December 9<sup>th</sup> and so on). For students to mobilize so quickly it must mean that they were already primed and ready for political action in anticipation for the next round of marketization in the university sector. To make this claim, the University of Manchester provides a good empirical case study as some of the grievances outlined by the student activists are generalizable to the university sector.

Before I started the research project outlined above there had been a student political campaign at the University of Manchester called 'Reclaim the University'. This campaign had arisen because students were dissatisfied with the condition of the education they were receiving. This included dissatisfaction with contact time (formal and informal teaching) lack of access to lecturers and tutors, lack of feedback from essay assignments and exams, and lectures conducted via video link because numbers on courses were too large to fit into one lecture theatre. These issues were interpreted by some students as the university trying to save time and by implication money and as such the

education as a or service good was seen as overpriced. As such this provoked a political response by some student union candidates who stood on a platform claiming: ‘ if elected I will demand a lecturer in front of every student’ ( i.e. not via video link), or ‘vote for me, I’m hungry for exam feedback’ ( as seen on election posters during student election campaigns).

In addition to these issues, whenever there was a complaint or sense of dissatisfaction amongst the social science students at the University of Manchester it became known amongst staff and students as the ‘Arthur Lewis effect’. This referred to The Arthur Lewis building, which houses the social science subjects. It is an open plan building, as such a swipe card entry procedure ( for staff and PhD students only) is in place. Undergraduate students must make an appointment in advance to see a lecturer and must phone them from the reception area before being met and allowed in. This building became an object of student grievance at the university Manchester because it was seen as an embodiment of commodification and marketization. As one interviewee put it: ‘It is the building where lecturers are not accessible’, ‘working behind closed doors writing for the Research Assessment exercise’ (now Research Excellence Framework) (Interviewee 1). And unable to give students the academic attention they *expected*. One activist explained that he and others set up a campaign called ‘reclaim the university’ to address ‘the commodification of the university’. Part of the campaign included organizing ‘a large occupation of the Arthur Lewis building’ (Interviewee 5). The reclaim the university campaign is particularly interesting since it signified the depth and breadth of discontent amongst the student population; since it attracted student

politicos from a variety of political societies including Conservative Future, Labour students, Liberal Youth, and the Socialist Worker student Society-groups not known for working together politically. Yet, when I interviewed them they all felt that they had been ill treated as students.

To gain further understanding of this from the students' perspective I asked them their thoughts on the way the higher education system was becoming more commodified and subject to market forces. What was striking is that the students I interviewed articulated their particular situation with the wider issues of commodification and marketization of the university sector more generally. Two interviewees explained their thoughts on this:

Looking at the commodification and marketization of higher education... I'm paying three thousand pounds a year and I'm getting four hours contact time a week and a glorified library subscription ...or you can look at it from a sort of – a much broader national level as well, the introduction of fees has changed the very nature of how we interact with higher education. So you know, before it was – could see it as a pursuit of knowledge and now it's a commodity that you want to get which is a sort of financial investment (interviewee 1)

You pay your fees and expect to have a higher paying job at the end of it, and so university suddenly becomes a - a financial investment

rather than the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself (interviewee 2).

Their comments are applicable to the university sector as a whole, particularly their concerns as regards to lack of contact time, the cost, and employment after university.

During the revolts of 2010-11, students from the occupation at the University of Sussex also framed their critique in terms of being against the marketization of higher education and echoed some of the same concerns:

‘not only are these cuts damaging our current education, but are changing the face of the education system as we know it. The hole in finances left by government cuts will inevitably be filled by private interest. This marketization of education will destroy the prospect of free and critical academic enquiry, on which universities should be based.’ (“Statement from the occupation”, 2010)

In addition to the university of Sussex, the Universities of Manchester, Leeds and East London all held teach-ins, which were attempts to create a community where people could exchange ideas in the spirit of education rather than as consumers.

It is clear from the above critiques that students think the nature of higher education has changed from an institution in which the pursuit of knowledge

was the end goal to one that now simply functions as an instrumental mechanism for gaining employment. As such the experience of being a student has become functional and utilitarian. In this respect, the capitalist market (such as charging higher fees) has offended against community norms and called into being a “moral” antagonist’ (Thompson, 1993, p. 340 citing Charlesworth and Randall, 1987, p. 213). This is particularly apt in the example of student fees and budget cuts to higher education. The encroachment of the free market has clearly created discontent amongst the student population and I would argue gives rise to the moral economy of protest.

### **The moral economy of student protests 2010-011**

It is important to explore Thompson’s (1993) arguments outlined in the chapter on the ‘moral economy of the crowd’ (pp185-258) since the student protests cannot simply be understood in terms of the rising price of education. The protests are underpinned by a moral economy. Thus the arguments are useful for understanding collective action beyond immediate economic price rises and to that end help explain why the crowd saw the new price rises of higher education as illegitimate:

‘By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the consensus of the community. It is of course true that the riots were triggered off by soaring price rises, by

malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular discourse as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling etc. (Thompson, 1993, p. 188).

The moral economy is a political negotiation between economic rationalization and cultural norms. Although fees for tuition had been in operation for sometime this recent trebling of fees was considered unfair, unjust and morally wrong. In 2010 students protestors were of the view that they were defending the traditional right to higher education and that the implementation of the new fee structure would hinder some students from less affluent backgrounds from accessing it. Some examples from my field notes express students' moral sentiments about the unjust nature of the increase in fees:

How are students from working class backgrounds going to afford the new rises? They are not, simple as that! (Interviewee 3, field notes, March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Education will be for elites now. Many students won't want to be saddled with that type of debt (interviewee 4, field notes, March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

The University of Sussex blog reinforces this point:

'The trebling of tuition fees will further exclude another swathe of society and make university accessible only to the rich'  
 ("Statement from the occupation", 2010)

The very fact that these students who were protesting and occupying would not be affected by the price rises demonstrates that the political actions are moral and not simply a utilitarian and individual reaction. As Thompson goes on to explain how the rioters in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century were part of wider social and political community who shared similar values and all had a normative understanding of traditions and entitlements. Thus riots against price rises are part of an expected response when traditions and entitlements are violated:

[practices were]... grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor' (Thompson, 1993, p.188).

In the case of the tuition fees some of the university authorities explicitly supported the student action, even including occupations. 'The Moral economy includes reference to shared understandings, memories and agreements' (Crossley, 2002, p.129). This means that even those in authority often share the same values and are sometimes in agreement with the actions of protestors. An example was at Leeds Trinity University from 2010-2011. The

then Vice Chancellor, Professor Freda Bridge, commented on the protests and occupations taking place at the University:

We are supportive of their campaign against government cuts in higher education and have worked positively with them to ensure they can carry out their protest. The students initiated a sit-in in December which they have continued to date (Garner, 2011)

The students were even given an office space from which to conduct their campaign:

‘By providing them with an office base we placed our trust in them to continue their activities in a peaceful manner and they have respected this by maintaining a well-organized protest that is not disruptive to our business and they have been professional at all times.’ (Garner, 2011)

As well as outright support there is also evidence of attempting to apply an emollient of sorts. According to the blog representing the University of Manchester student occupation, the president (Vice Chancellor) of the University of Manchester made a statement to students during the occupation of university buildings in 2010:



'Let me be absolutely clear; for those of you already enrolled on courses here, there is absolutely no question of your tuition fees suddenly going up.' ("Manunioccupation", 2010)

'The University will clearly need to adapt to future financial challenges – but we will do so in a way that fulfills our key commitment to delivering an outstanding student experience.'

("Manunioccupation", 2010)

When there has been a violation of entitlement Thompson is clear that authorities and elites realize that part of the moral economy is that rioters have a right to defend their tradition under threat. We see from the above statements that there is an acknowledgement that students have a right to protest against rising tuition fees and cuts to the higher education budget. This suggests that the introduction of cuts to the higher education budget were seen as illegitimate not just by the student population but by the university authorities, normatively speaking. This is broadly congruent with Thompson's account of how in some instances Justice's of the Peace were called to arbitrate between the crowd on the one hand and the marketer on the other. The JP would often side with the crowd (Thompson, 1971).

## **Repertoires of contention**

Thompson has argued that collective and direct action (including rioting) was not only a rational response to rising food costs, but required a consensus of support from the community (1993, p. 238). In actuality, 'the popular ethic sanctioned direct action by the crowd' (1993, p. 212). Such political practices develop over time. Thompson explains that they are 'an inherited pattern of action' (1993, p. 238). These political practices are diffused down from previous generations. Therefore, the riot and other forms of direct action, e.g. seizing food through force and threats made against marketers, bakers, millers etc., are all part of the 18 century repertoire of contention. They are learned, rational and bounded by the historical period in which they exist:

The word *repertoire* identifies a limited set of routines that are learned, shared and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice. Repertoires are learned cultural creations...they emerge from struggle. People learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, and petition, hold formal meetings, and organize special interest associations. (Tilly, 1995, p. 26)

'Protestors choose their repertoire from available stock and are identified with specific historical periods' (Crossley, 2002, p. 128). In a similar way, occupations, demonstrations, petitions and now blogging are established repertoires of contention for today's students just like the food riot was for the 18<sup>th</sup> century crowd. Although we are now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and so the political actions of students may seem very different to the peasants in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

there are some important similarities that should be pointed out. The wider student community has shown enough support for fellow students involved in the protests and occupations to constitute the term community. No community is ever totally homogenous, not even an 18<sup>th</sup> century one. However, my argument is that students are, by and large, supported by the wider community and they do share enough common ground to constitute a community. They have certainly demonstrated solidarity with students across a wide geographical spread, in this sense they could be seen as a political crowd. Or why else would there have been 40 occupations in universities from the north to the south of the UK? And by Scottish students who are not even affected by the fee rises? The only answer can be that they shared a strength of feeling and moral outrage to the rise in fees and cuts in the H.E. budget. Further evidence can be seen in the statement below which shows support from Universities of London and Sussex after the protestors at Milbank were criticized by the NUS and the UCU:

We reject any attempt to characterize the Milbank protest as small, 'extremist' or unrepresentative of our movement. We celebrate the fact that thousands of students were willing to send a message to the Tories that we will fight to win. Occupations are a long established tradition in the student movement that should be defended ("Defend the right to protest", 2010)

It is evident too that students chose tangible objects to occupy and or smash, not to dissimilar to the rational outrage (sic) experienced by preindustrial

communities when the prices of bread increased. Farmers' houses were sometimes placed under threat, for example. As Thompson has added it is important to understand the underlying symbolism of the action not just the action itself. This is why students on national demonstrations mobilized at Milbank and similarly at Manchester chose the Arthur Lewis building to occupy because they were seen as tangible and symbolic objects to which carry out a protest.

## **Conclusion**

Using new empirical evidence I have argued that the student protests and occupations of 2010-2011 should be seen as a moral economy (Thompson, 1971, 1993). Analogous to the crowds and mobs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Thompson, 1971) and the citizens who protested against the poll tax in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bagguley, 1996), the students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are fighting as much against the immorality of the increase in price and unfair practices of those concerned than that of the actual financial increase.

This however did not happen overnight, or even over a year or two but for around 15 years we have seen student cycles of contention rise and fall in the UK, both locally and nationally. The latest issue- fees and cuts- provoked a massive response and we saw an upswing because the price set for fees was considered to be too high. This is analogous to the political and rational crowd in the 18<sup>th</sup> century fighting over the cost of bread. I know some will automatically ask: How can we consider bread in a subsistence economy the same as

education in an advanced capitalist economy? This question would miss my point, however. My claim is not that bread in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is the same as education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially because having the former could mean the difference between life and death. Rather, we must focus on entitlement and tradition and how violation of these invokes a moral economy. In this case students believed they were *entitled* to affordable higher education and it is this that has been taken away because of the imposition of market forces. Further, in a similar way to preindustrial protestors, there is no effective mediating institution that students can turn to in order that fees be reversed. The only way open for students to politically negotiate their position is through protest; there is no other way to challenge the market or the politicians who made the decision. The NUS does not have any power in Parliament, or elsewhere, to challenge government policy.

This lack of institutionalized power meant that students occupied and attacked objects of their grievance they perceived as symbolic and legitimate targets. This is analogous to the mills and machines which were smashed by crowds in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and toll gates in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the price of bread increased, livelihoods were threatened, or, when rights of way became privatized (Hobsbawm & Rude 1969). Student protest repertoires have become routinized. For decades demonstrations and occupations have been a stock resource for students to try and attempt a political negotiation. One final point, although students cannot bring sanctions against those who did not participate, it does not alter the fact that the reasons for the grievance are there and as I have argued elsewhere universities produce a critical mass for students to

mount campaigns. They have the resources akin to a political community on campus including media and communication networks to put themselves in touch with other politicians across the campus and the country's multiple universities and it is through these 21<sup>st</sup> century ways of political networking that a community is formed. (Author & Author 2012).

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